Tribalism, Dependency and the Sub-Regional Dynamics of Economic Change in Central India 1820-1930

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TRIBALISM, DEPENDENCY AND THE SUB-REGIONAL DYNAMICS OF ECONOMIC CHANGE IN CENTRAL INDIA, 1820–1930

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Introduction

The need to advance on simple 'world system' paradigms has long been a concern of students of underdevelopment theory.[1] Steps have been taken in this direction in recent work on Africa and South-East Asia.[2] The need for 'intermediate typologies' to help tackle this problem has also become apparent to many historians engaged in the study of the Indian economy. One way of going about this could be to use the concept of the agro-economic zone as a unit of political economy, defining different zones within India according to the characteristic systems of surplus appropriation to be found within each—whether they be primarily sponsored by the state, trading companies, or by rentier or entrepreneurial landlords.[3] Seen from this perspective, a striking feature of the Central Indian economy in the mid-nineteenth century was the growth of the trade in cheap grain and labour between zones, which paralleled the growth of the international trades in cotton and wheat via Bombay.

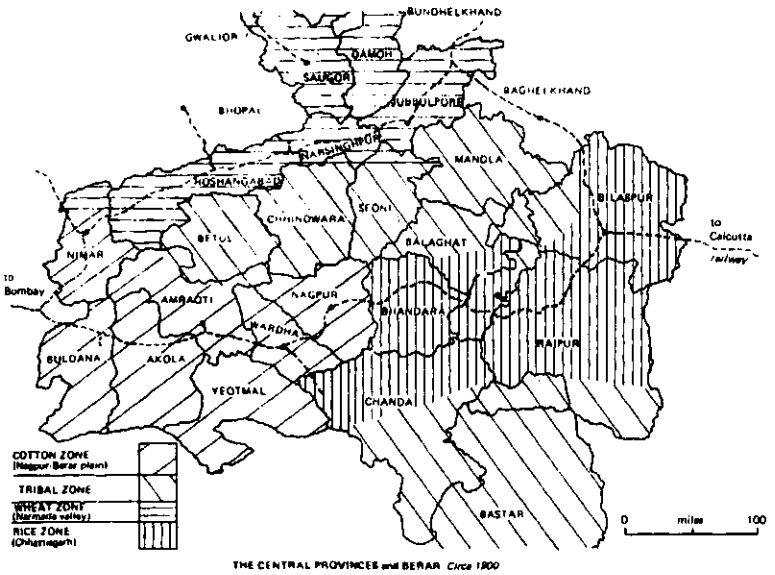
Unevenness was the hallmark of commercialisation in India, cotton production being concentrated in discrete localities such as Khandesh, South Gujarat, and the Nagpur-Berar region of Central India, rather than over provinces as a whole. The

impact of this cotton boom on social stratification was very varied. In central India a key factor was the construction of the railway which encouraged both agricultural specialisation and the growth of inter-regional dependency. But while the Nagpur-Berar region enjoyed a broadly-based and progressive development of its economy as a consequence of the cotton trade, the tribal areas and Chhattisgarh experienced a lop-sided development—the gains being poorly distributed and large swathes of the population remaining unaffected by the growth of the commercial economy.

In this paper an attempt is made to explain this 'resistance to capital' by applying a theory of tribal economics. The contention is that areas in the Satpuras, Maikal hills, southern Madhya Pradesh, and parts of Chhattisgarh generally functioned according to such a pre-capitalist, indeed 'pre-feudal' economic ideology (or rationale) well into the colonial period. When confronted with the commercial and coercive pressures of British rule this tribal system collapsed, both morally and economically, and the seasonal or sometimes permanent migration of labour away from these areas resulted. Other tribal areas, less influenced by these pressures, lapsed into an isolated and stagnant reproduction of tribal patterns of subsistence. Those parts of Central Chhattisgarh which had come under the rule of the Haihaivansi kings, and were the first to be overrun by the Marathas and the British, had time to adapt, and they were able to effect a more gradual switch to a petty commodity mode of production based on the cultivation of rice. At first this merely served the tax and supply demands of the invading armies, but increasingly they began to meet the commercial demands of the developing Nagpur-Berar cotton zone to the west. At the same time as there was adaptation, however, there was resistance, and there survived in some areas a form of communal land control known as *lakhabatta*, which served to mitigate the more divisive social effects of this commercialisation.

The Cotton Boom and the Dependent Development of Chhattisgarh

In 1888, a broad gauge railway connected Nagpur with Raipur in Chhattisgarh. In 1889 this line was extended to Bilaspur; in 1891 it was extended to Asansol (in north-west Bengal), and in 1900 rail connection was made with Calcutta. Nagpur had already been connected by rail to Bombay at the time of the American Civil War boom, but it was the connection of Nagpur with Chhattisgarh and the interior that brought about a second cotton boom far exceeding anything that had happened before.



THE CENTRAL PROVINCES and BERAR *Circa 1800*

From the 1860s onwards, imports of foodgrains, particularly from Chhattisgarh, marched hand in hand with the extension of cotton cultivation, facilitating increasing crop specialisation and overall population and urban growth.[4] A close (but slightly lagged) correlation is clearly seen between the growth in cotton production in the Nagpur-Berar region, and rice production in Chhattisgarh. Likewise, the decline in cotton cultivation after 1930 was mirrored by a slowing in the rate of growth in the rice zone up until 1937. Trade statistics tell a similar tale. A survey of the traffic on the Great Eastern Road connecting Nagpur and Chhattisgarh in 1873-6 showed that exports of grain and oilseeds averaged almost exactly a million maunds a year. Ten years later the exports averaged 2.8 million maunds.[5] At the time of the second settlement of the districts (1885-89) the chief commissioner's secretary wrote 'while formerly six-sevenths of the surplus produce failed to find a market, the

cultivator now has numbers of foreign merchants, almost at his door, eager to purchase grain'. Foremost among these was the firm of Ralli brothers, who were also heavily involved in the cotton trade of Nagpur.[6]

By 1896/7, out of a total internal grain trade in the Central Provinces of 1.3 million maunds, almost exactly half was exported by rail from Chhattisgarh specifically to the Nagpur country and a further 493,000 maunds went to the Narmada valley. By the 1900s, grain production in Chhattisgarh was increasing exponentially. In 1901-02 exports of raw cotton from the Nagpur-Berar region doubled to 1.4 million maunds and with the rise in price after 1904 a veritable mania developed. Grain exports from Chhattisgarh simultaneously increased until in 1907 exports amounted to 1.2 million maunds. Renewed growth in the cotton economy after the end of the First World War in turn led to a further increase in Chhattisgarh exports to Nagpur and Berar. By 1923-4, imports of rice to just the Nagpur country from Chhattisgarh had increased to over a million maunds, and 300,000 maunds of wheat were imported, 40 per cent of it coming from Chhattisgarh. In addition, Berar imported 900,000 maunds of rice from the Central Provinces and 600,000 maunds of wheat, 60 per cent coming directly from Chhattisgarh and 40 per cent being re-exported from Nagpur. All in all, Nagpur and Berar swallowed up 77 per cent of the total internal trade in rice, and between them absorbed approximately two-thirds of the total grain exports of Chhattisgarh.[7]

The extension of cultivation and the growth of trade was no great boon to the average inhabitant of Chattisgarh even in the early 1920s (when for a while over 60 per cent of the cropped area came under rice). As in the Narmada valley wheat zone, much of the benefit went to intermediaries: firstly the big Nagpuri importers, and secondly the local intermediaries. In Chhattisgarh these local intermediaries did not even have much involvement in agricultural production, being either *kheparis* (small traders) or, more rarely, one of the local 'big men' who frequented the principal markets with their carts and profited by the low prices at which grain was obtainable in the villages. Most cultivators produced for their own consumption and had little need of money or of recourse to the market. Those who did sell for export received a relatively low price for their grain, a fact which was

Government of India's 1941 report on the marketing of rice. This report studied the trade between eight major producing and consuming centres, and revealed that the Raipur cultivator who exported Hansa rice to Nagpur received the smallest share of all, only 58 per cent, of the final retail price.[8] Overall, the growers themselves were responsible for marketing only 27 per cent of the total marketable surplus. The bulk of the grain was handled by village merchants, landlords, Nagpuri merchants, itinerant traders (the *kheparis*) and a handful of rich peasants. This state of affairs compared badly with the Nagpur-Berar region where, by the 1920s, the Central Cotton committee estimated that something like 60 per cent of the cultivators took their own produce to market. This figure was higher than even in the highly prosperous cotton growing areas of Khandesh and Middle Gujarat.[9]

In the early nineteenth century surplus appropriation in Chhattisgarh had been principally governed by its political subordination to Nagpur and the taxes imposed by the Bhonsle's *subhadars*. By the 1920s, the trade with Nagpur had created conditions of economic dependence in which urban merchants, traders and a minority of local Brahmin 'big men' were the chief beneficiaries. The Brahmins were often non-residents and held the proprietary right to nearly a quarter of the villages. The majority of tenants remained much as they had been: sharecroppers in some cases, but most of them farming small holdings at rents that remained static until the intervention of the settlement officer raised them in line with the revenue demands of the State. Average landholdings were smaller than anywhere else in central India. The typical 'ordinary' tenant's holding was only 3.8 acres in Bilaspur in the 1890s. Extensive scattering reduced the size of fields still further. One study in the Raipur district examined over 300 villages in 1913 and found that the average size of a cultivated plot was only 0.55 acres during the *kharif* and *rabi* seasons. The average rice field was rarely more than 0.2 acres in area. In the 1920s more than 50 per cent of the cultivators cultivated holdings smaller than 5 acres, the average number of fields per holding being 17, compared with 2 or 3 elsewhere in the Central Provinces.[10]

So it was that the 1929 Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee observed that despite the development of trade, the majority of cultivators in Chhattisgarh still produced largely

for subsistence, grain was still the main medium of exchange, and credit and exchange relations were generally underdeveloped by comparison with the cotton and wheat growing tracts of Nagpur, Berar, and the Narmada valley.[11] In general, the developing trade with Nagpur and the west had a trickle-down effect which became a mere drip beyond the top quarter or third of the tenant population, leaving many in a markedly inferior position under the combined effects of population growth, the fragmentation of holdings and a shortage of cattle-power and other resources. The Chamars were amongst the 'helots' of this society. Twenty-nine per cent of them in Raipur were classified as class D tenants, a category containing that quarter of the tenant population without cattle or heavily in debt. Such tenants usually sublet their land and migrated in search of work. Above them came the *ekpaon*, as they were known in Durg. This category included those who possessed cattle, though not enough to cultivate without borrowing those of a partner, those who had cattle but had to borrow seed, or else the larger tenant who was encumbered with heavy debts. These accounted for 40 per cent of the tenant population in Raipur and 46 per cent in Bilaspur. Above them came the 36 per cent in Raipur and 46 per cent in Bilaspur known as *mandals* or well-to-do tenants, and the 2 per cent of class A tenants. Fourteen per cent of the tenants in Bilaspur, however, were described as dependent wholly on their income from (often migrant) labouring, and as living a hand to mouth existence.[12]

British land settlement policy failed in this region, there being a general stasis in rents, and a resistance to the establishment of anything like proper landlord-tenant relations in the wake of the settlements of the 1860s. It is possible that the flow of seasonal migrants which resulted (and which paralleled the trade in grain), may have helped retard the development of production techniques in the rice-growing and tribal areas. Migration was a way of escaping the pressures of population growth, the interventions of the state and the encroachment of settlers, moneylenders and tradesmen from the lowlands, at a time when these pressures called for urgent change within the communities themselves if they were to survive.[13] In particular, it may have drawn off, in return for immediate rewards, a surplus of labour that would in the long run have been better employed in clearing waste lands, terracing slopes, or building irrigation facilities. In the case of trade, however, it is rather more difficult to demonstrate the immediate effects on the organisation of production, in fact its most striking feature was its negative effect—the changes it did not evoke.

One explanation may be to accept that there had been for a long time in Central India an ontologically distinct system of production in the tribal areas with its own peculiar ideology and system of social and political organisation. This social formation gave its own momentum to local economic developments and tended to resist the pressures of external economic change. For sensible, material reasons the tribal societies in these areas had chiefs or *zamindars* responsible for the co-ordination of society at the clan and supra-clan levels. This did not mean that they were being 'de-tribalised' (as Marshall Sahlins would argue). In some areas these tribal forms of society survived. But in central Chhattisgarh tribal institutions were exploited by Haihaivansi, Maratha and British invaders as an easy means of imposing their rule. Commerce developed and rice production extended. But there were various ways these pressures could be contained. Foremost was the ancient custom of communal land control, known in Chhattisgarh as *lakhabatta*. This served to frustrate the revolutionary principles of British land legislation, and consequently to obstruct the penetration of capital and the revolutionising of productive relations.

The Tribal Mode of Production

In parts of southern Madhya Pradesh and the Satpura and Maikal highlands this tribal system of economy, and the forms of social organisation associated with it, survive to this day. The basic techniques of tribal production were *begar* and *dhya*, the shifting cultivation of coarse grains such as *kodon* and *kutki* in the ashes of forests cleared by use of fire and the axe (virtually their only agricultural implement).[14] Already established clearings were recultivated after three to five years of fallowing, in which case it was necessary to do no more than raze the light scrub and undergrowth before scattering the seed once again. The forests also afforded game, berries, roots, fruits and nuts, as well as the ubiquitous *mahua* flower, which was fermented into a heady and nourishing brew.

The basic unit of production was the extended family or sub-clan group, known as the *bhaiband*, which contained up to

80 persons, though often as few as a dozen. Associated with this was a highly dispersed pattern of settlement, there being a minimum area within which a family group (2.4 persons) could could carry on a shifting pattern of cultivation without exhausting the very forest on which they depended. Jungle produce itself could also be a rare commodity. In Mandla the area needed for cultivation by a sub-clan, on a shifting basis, was probably at least 75 acres, but for hunting and foraging an area many times greater than this was required. It thus needed only a small increase in population to take place for competition and conflict between neighbouring sub-clans to arise. This gave clan and supra-clan levels of tribal organisation an important role to play as mediators and consolidators in cases of dispute.[15]

Authority within this tribal system was distributed in quite the opposite manner to that described by Frank Perlin in the west central Deccan. Perlin has stressed that there was nothing hallowed about the village as an institution in the Maratha system and demonstrates this by showing how Maratha officers acquired rights and influence at all levels of the rural hierarchy. He shows that in fact there was no 'hierarchy', shares in village offices being disposed of part and parcel with the revenue farm of whole parganas.[16] The picture in the tribal areas of central India was very different. It was not simply that the control of men was more important than material possessions, since power itself came much more from below. The very fact of clan and sub-clan organisation allowed superiors to raise taxes or to rally the tribals in opposition to a common enemy—the *quid pro quo* being that the superior authority acted as a judicial arbitrator in cases of dispute between neighbouring villages or clans over the right to cultivate or forage in diferent tracts of forest.[17]

M.D. Sahlins argues that the essence of tribal economy and society was the Domestic Mode of Production, 'a species of anarchy', and dismisses any form of supra-local organisation as, at best, 'purely conjunctural', and at worst, a sign of modernisation. According to this definition 'tribalism' in India not only disappeared many hundreds of years ago but probably never even existed. The only function Sahlins sees for chiefship is generosity: the simple restitution, as gifts, of goods collected in tribute. The only form of exchange he sees is reciprocal exchange between family groups for the purpose of peace-making. It is no surprise that within such a narrow,

ahistorical model, Sahlins should find it impossible to explain primitive trade without reference to the laws of supply and demand. None of Sahlin's evidence is taken from the Indian subcontinent. By contrast, I would argue that the principal functions of chiefship at all levels in central Indian tribal society were, and in a very few areas still are, judicial and redistributive, in accordance with (1) a principle of equality, and (2) the demands of territorial integrity. Such a formulation, I believe, effectively overcomes the lack of context which Bernstein and others have noticed in Sahlin's description of the tribal mode of production, particularly his explanation of the role of chiefship.[18]

In the early nineteenth century, the typical tribal village consisted of only three or four huts in which there lived two or three generations of the same family. Between them, they were able to meet all the requirements of production and reproduction.[19] This did not, however, rule out exchange altogether. The payment of tributes imposed a degree of circulation. Axeheads and other implements had to be made and paid for with grain, axeheads themselves becoming a form of currency that was still in circulation in the northern zamindaris of Bilaspur as late as the 1930s.[20] Chhattisgarh was also traversed by Bhanjara caravans bringing salt and cowries from the Orissa coast, which were exchanged for grain. The taxes imposed by the Bhonsle's *subhadars* (or governors) in the late eighteenth century also created a constant drain of grain toward Nagpur. Altogether by the end of the eighteenth century the total trade of the Chhattisgarh country, both north, south and west, was believed to employ up to 100,000 bullocks in a good season, indicative of a total trade of something like 100,000 maunds.[21] Even if much of this trade was passing through en route, such a movement of goods obviously had some effect on the country through which it passed. Given the size of the country, however, 100,000 maunds is not a staggering statistic, and the Bhanjaras themselves were not Chhattisgarhis. Significantly, there was little return trade from the direction of Nagpur, and as late as the 1860s the only redress for this imbalance was an importation of bullion that was largely divided among government, traders and *zamindars*.[22]

By contrast, in those developed lowland areas which had come under Mughal or Maratha administration, such as Nagpur, production depended to a far greater extent on ex-

tended networks of trade and credit. The 'village' contained many families, marked divisions of labour, and various rights of ownership. The cultivated area tended to be correspondingly much larger and more fixed. Production was more oriented toward exchange rather than subsistence, and rentier classes were to be found in positions of influence both in the village and at the regional level.

In the typical tribal village in Bastar, it was said that questions of property seldom arose, '. . . there being obviously so little scope for dispute when 95 per cent of the cultivation is shifting cultivation of hillsides regarded as the property of the clan and not of the individual . . . ', an observation repeated as recently as the late 1960s by M.M. Joshi. In Mandla district in the 1950s Stephen Fuchs observed:

> 'Individual members of a tribal group had no title deeds to any definite piece of land, for in their society land was in the joint possession of a whole family group or kinship group . . . even if a Gond is fully entitled by government rules to dispose of his immovable property as he pleases, old tribal convention does not allow him to do so . . .'[23]

This tribal system survived in the Satpuras, the jungly fastness of Bastar and Chanda, and parts of Chhattisgarh, largely because of their isolation. The basic egalitarian character of this system persisted long after the areas were taken over by Maratha and then British rulers.

By the late nineteenth century an important difference existed between the Chhattisgarh 'rice' zone and the modern 'tribal' zone (see map). This was because in the central *khalsa* area of Chhattisgarh the Marathas and the British had made much more determined efforts to introduce and uphold the authority of revenue intermediaries introduced over the heads of the *gaontias*, who were traditionally the heads of the tribal as well as of mixed tribal and Hindu villages. Hence the dualistic nature of Chhattisgarhi society which has been noted, and the consequentially differential impact of commercialisation. In the 'tribal' zone the same attempt to subordinate the tribal system was not made. Tribal zamindars, chiefs and cultivators were either left alone or ultimately supplanted altogether by the Forest Department or Hindu malguzars imported from the lowlands. In this, British settlement policy had a large part to play, promoting expropriation and forcing the tribals out of the forests and into a dependence on the earnings from migrant labour.[24]

The Origins of the Rice Zone

It has already been mentioned that central Chhattisgarh was subject to invasion and the conversion of cultivators away from a tribal mode of subsistence and towards a petty commodity mode of production based on rice.

Inscriptional evidence tells us that the ancient Haihaivansi kingdom established in Chhattisgarh was split into two in the fourteenth century. Their capitals were situated at Ratanpur and Raipur respectively (though that of Ratanpur always remained the senior house). Each was subdivided into *garhs* or *chaurasis*, which were headed by individuals known as *diwan, thakur, garhpati* or, in Sambalpur, *gadotiya*.[25] The similarity between these Haihaivansi administrative units and the territorial units uncovered by anthropological research among tribals is striking, particularly when terms such as *garhpati* are encountered, *garh* being the name given to a territorial grouping of Gond tribals in Raipur, and *patti* being the name given to a grouping of 50-100 villages in the tribal district of Chanda.[26] Significantly, *diwans* and *thakurs* were often local tribal chiefs rather than scions of the Royal House (as was the theory).

A number of sources suggest that power remained essentially at this local level, the Ratanpur and Raipur kings being little more than titular sovereigns.[27] The power of the *diwan, thakur,* or *grahpati* was in turn derived from a number of *barhons* (clusters of 12 villages), which was probably the local name for the simple clan area (coterminus with the *pattis* of south Chanda). The head of this unit was known as a *deo* or *barhainihas*. Each of these 'villages' was then known as a *gaon*, the corresponding title of the headman being *gaontia*. In the tribal chiefdoms on the fringes of the Haihaivansi kingdom the hierarchy was simpler and even more closely resembled an idealised 'clan' system.

The Maratha rulers who took over the Haihaivansi kingdom in the eighteenth century merely replaced some of the *diwans* or *garhpatis* with their own *kumaishdars*. Many of the *barhainihas* or *taluqdars* were replaced with Brahmin *patels*, but the original *gaontias* were untouched. Thus, as C.U. Wills wrote, '. . . the

whole land system of Chhattisgarh was a compromise and a concession to local custom . . . ', a State apparatus superimposed on a tribal base.[28] The power of these *gaontias* was further reinforced by Vans Agnew, the British superintendent in charge of Chhattisgarh in the early 1820s during the British Protectorate, when he reduced the number of *kumaishdars* from 27 to 8 in an effort to streamline the administration. Together, these factors help to explain the extraordinary difficulties encountered by the British when they tried to regularize the revenue system and to introduce a *malguzari* or landlord system of settlement in the 1860s.

In political terms there was thus adaptation, but also an element of continuity. Looking at the economy, we find that taxes and the majority of other transactions continued to be paid for largely by barter or with grain in the villages of the interior, even at the end of the colonial period.[29] In Raipur and Bilaspur low yielding, broadcast methods of rice cultivation continued to be practised, partly because improvements (such as transplantation) were discouraged by the widespread and chronic fragmentation of holdings. The efforts of the government irrigation department to build a system of canals were tardy and inefficient and had little impact before the 1930s. A shortage of bullock power further discouraged any switch to more advanced techniques, or a more diversified cropping pattern. In the village, the reciprocal exchange of labour, customs such as *begar* (obligatory labour service to a patron), and the reciprocal exchange of cattle power all continued as traditional means of cultivating the land. At the same time however, the spread of the railway, the growth of market towns such as Raipur, the construction of rice mills, and the growing number of itinerant traders together introduced a degree of commercialisation which it was impossible to avoid.

The Problem of Fragmentation

One aspect of the ancient tribal system that was used as a means of resisting the social pressures of commercialisation was a custom of communal control village lands known as *lakhabatta*:

> According to this custom, the village headman, known as the Gaontia, held high the principle of equality in land distribution, pooled all the land together, at different times, and re-allocated it to various farm-families on the basis of the ploughs under use with them. This practice aimed not only at a proportionate redivisioning of the village land among the then existing families dependent on cultivation, but also at apportioning to each one of them a fraction of each of the four kinds of land found in the respective village. This being the case, whenever there was an occasion in later years for effecting a family partition by metes and bounds, it resulted in multiplying the number of land fragments as often enough. Infinitely small fragments, strewn in the different directions of the village, therefore, became the characteristic feature of the agricultural holdings of Chhattisgarh.

In former times, when the sub-clan had control over the village lands, these fragments could always be consolidated at the next redistribution, but the British banned *lakhabatta*, kept records of property rights, and substituted a tax on land for the tax on ploughs that had previously prevailed. This had the result that within the space of only a few years many plots had been reduced to the size of a dining table and programmes of consolidation became a government responsibility. The concept of landlordship introduced by the British was also disputed, and the grant of proprietary rights often ignored. Commenting on the position of the tenantry in Chhattisgarh and the custom of *lakhabatta*, the divisional commissioner wrote:

> Surely a more striking example of village communism, and of ryot rights going beyond the ryotwari system of Madras or Bombay, could not be imagined, and yet it is ryots with these antecedents that since 1864 have come to be considered as mere tenants-at-will, holding at the pleasure of the men who, by the grace of the British government, have been changed from gaontias into proprietors.[31]

J.F. Keatinge (chief commissioner of the Central Provinces between 1870 and 1872) concurred: 'they are rather inclined to look upon the ryots of a village as a commune or a club. Hence the notion of selling their rights as ryots has not found entrance into their minds ....'[32] This attitude was not more atavism, but could also serve as defence.

An alternative and rather narrower economic explanation for the fragmentation of holding found in Chhattisgarh has been

put forward by Neil Charlesworth.[33] Charlesworth argues that it was evidence of risk aversion, a superabundance of soil varieties, of diversification and intensification in response to commercial opportunities, and that an important precondition was the simultaneous pressure of population growth. To begin with population growth: this was certainly a factor, as Charlesworth argues, but was not in itself sufficient to account for all the fragmentation occurring, since the number of holdings was doubling every 25 years, a rate four times that of the growth of population. The Planning Commission of 1956-57 estimated that overall inheritance could account for only 37 per cent of the increase in holdings in Chhattisgarh.[34] Risk aversion, also, is an insufficient explanation for the continuing growth of fragmentation. Unless one can demonstrate a growing threat to the subsistence base of the cultivating population which might have this effect. It would also be reasonable to ask, if commercial opportunity was an influence, why there was not an equally serious problem with fragmentation in areas like the Nagpur-Berar plain where both commercialisation and population growth were rapid. Why also was there not a widespread development of land-leasing in Chhattisgarh to compensate for the fragmentation of holdings, as there was in other commercialised areas? An abundance of different soil varieties is another phenomenon by no means unique to the Chhattisgarh region.

Equally important is the lack of any real evidence that rising labour costs motivated cultivators deliberately to fragment their holdings so as to make better use of family labour. For this explanation to hold water one would have to argue that labour costs had been rising almost continuously since the middle of the nineteenth century, which would beg a great many questions about the lack of mechanisation and the poverty of labourers (still apparent today). It can be argued that the cotton zone, at least, enjoyed a number of decades of rising real wages for labour. For other zones the evidence is contestable, and in the case of the Narmada valley wheat zone there was a period of rapid agricultural growth in the late nineteenth century during which real wages were actually forced down. The real incomes of labouring families also tumbled quite generally once the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s began to be felt.

Of all these possible explanations, the greatest weight of

evidence is to be found for the concept of 'risk aversion', but not in the sense of risk aversion as a commercial response to changing market conditions. Instead, it was a form of resistance to the effects of commercialisation itself. Evidence in support of this idea is to be found in the connection between fragmentation and *lakhabatta*. Both were more common in Bilaspur district than in Raipur. This was not a coincidence. Fragmentation was also more common among the Chamars, a group well known for the strength of their community feeling, as has been attested in a study by L.A. Babb.[35] The origins of the custom, I believe, lay in the egalitarian ideology of 'tribalism'. This encouraged a free and regular exchange of land in precolonial times (involving customs such as *lakhabatta*). This exchange was inhibited by the British administration's attempts to encase agrarian relations within the confines of tenancy and proprietary law. The option of carving virgin land out of the neighbouring jungle to add to the village area also became impossible owing to the reservation of forests by the government.

At a time of extending cultivation within the village area this stymying of the land market meant that it was difficult for already fragmented holdings to be consolidated and rationalised as before. *Lakhabatta* could not go ahead without producing intense disputes and inequalities which could only be resolved by further fragmentation. Their insistence on doing this illustrates the resistance of rice cultivators to the pressures of the commercialism with which they were becoming involved. The influence of an egalitarian ideology also helps explain why there was a general stasis in rents and the land market in the first few decades of British rule. While ryots sometimes absconded from under the heels of the Maratha patels who had been granted proprietary rights, in the case of the *gaontias* made into *malguzars*, both *malguzars* and tenants often simply ignored the new land rights and carried on as if nothing had changed. Inevitably many other curious anomalies were thrown up in later years during the resettlement of the districts.[36]

Conclusion

Unlike in the cotton and wheat zones of central India, the tribals and the rice-cultivators of Chhattisgarh remained sub-

sistence oriented, society fissiparous and cultivating techniques primitive. On the borders of tribal areas, Rajput conquest and other contacts with Maratha or Mughal rulers provoked adaptations and compromises in the tribal social order, and a variety of different state systems flourished on the frontier between the settled and the unsettled. This was particularly the case with the Korkus and Kolis of western C.P. and of the Bombay Deccan, as well as with the Gond chiefdoms in the Mahadeo and Vindhyan hills on the southern and northern flanks of the Narmada valley. Masters of the hill passes and other important lines of communication, they sometimes treated with the plainsmen, guaranteeing the borders of the settled areas and offering a token tribute in exchange for freedom from interference. In this way tribal groups could be incorporated into a segmentary state system, rather like the *nadus* lying on the fringes of the Chola empire in South India which Burton Stein has described. Other parallels may be seen in the non-coercive methods of maintaining their rule adopted by the Khurda Rajas in the tribal areas of pre-colonial Orissa.[49] The introduction of Haihaivansi rule, and much later the conquest of the region by the Marathas, meant that the tribal organisation of Chhattisgarh was more compromised than others by the pressure of exogenous political forces. Inevitably this set in train a gradual erosion of the tribal way of life. By the mid-nineteenth century large areas of forest had been cleared in Chhattisgarh, a small-scale, unsophisticated pattern of settled rice cultivation known as *biasi* had become the norm, and according to the censuses the tribals had been reduced to less than 40 per cent of the population in most of the British ruled districts. Central India was exceptional, however, in that large tracts in districts such as Mandla, Surguja, Bilaspur, Bastar and Chanda remained completely untouched in this way, whilst underlying the different adaptations and compromises of the archetypal tribal state and society that were to be found, there persisted examples of a tribal system of economy whose rationality was practically unchanged.

The defining feature of the tribal mode of production was not swidden as such, but the *bhaiband* or sub-clan cultivating unit. Where this was most rapidly undermined the population often resorted to migration. In central Chhattisgarh, in contrast, tribal social organisation came under pressure at a much earlier stage. Many resorted to migration or to government service in the Maratha army (this being the eighteenth century equivalent to the modern Public Works Department). The development of settled rice production allowed many more the means to adapt to, as well as to resist, the economic changes brought with them by the Marathas and British. The ancient tribal custom of *lakhabatta* persisted and was used as a means of frustrating the divisive social effects of commercialisation and the introduction of private property rights by the British.

This resistance represented not merely a material response to economic change (or 'risk aversion'), but also a commitment to the ideology of a precapitalist mode of production. In this system egalitarianism was valued highly, and the role of chiefship, or the 'tribal state' was merely to act as judicial arbiter in disputes between neighbouring sub-clan units. Agricultural surpluses were coincidental, rather than being a deliberate end. Their only value was to pay taxes, or to trade with passing merchants in exchange for salt, metal goods and other luxuries and foodstuffs, or sometimes a few cowries. They were also given as tributes to zamindars and chiefs. Above all it was the price one paid for peace. It was only very gradually that commodity exchange as such became fully integrated into the reproduction of the economy at the village level.

These precapitalist methods of surplus appropriation and the changing economic rationality that went with them ought be recognised as an important object of enquiry requiring further elaboration, as well as a closer focus. In particular, they ought perhaps be given as much weight as the uneven economic effects of capitalist penetration, and the impact of colonial 'bantuization' policies, in any attempt to explain the related phenomena of dependency and development in rural central India.

Glossary

Terms referring to villages or groups of villages and their heads are defined at the beginning of the section of the paper on 'The Origins of the Rice Zone'.

begar	forced labour
bhaiband	sub-clan
biasi	settled rice cultivation
ekpaon	poor tenant
kharif	autumn
khalsa	government controlled land

khepari	small trader
kodon/kutki	coarse grain millets
lakhabatta	communal tenure land redistribution
mahua	tree flower made into beer
malguzar	landlord
mandal	well-to-do tenant
rabi	spring
subahdar	governor
zamindar	landowner
zamindari	estate

Abbreviations

CPPBECR	*Report of the Central Provinces Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-1930*, 4 vols. (Nagpur, 1930).
SR	*Settlement Report*.

NOTES

The research for this paper was conducted in the Madhya Pradesh Central Record Office, Nagpur; the Agro-Economic Research Centre, Jabalpur; Cambridge University; and the India Office Library, London. All records referred to are from the Nagpur archive.

1. E. Laclau, 'Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America,' in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London, 1977); R. Brenner, 'The Origins of Capitalist Development: a Critique of neo-Smithian Marxism', *New Left Review*, 104 (1977); A. Foster-Carter, 'The Modes of Production Controversy', *New Left Review*, 107 (1978), 47-77.
2. G. Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petite Bourgeoisie, 1905-1970* (Yale, 1980); J.S. Kahn, *Minangkabau Social Formations: Indonesian Peasants and the World Economy* (Cambridge, 1980).
3. Although simple ecological divisions are often discussed the political economic notion of an agro-economic zone has not been taken seriously except by a few southern Indian historians. See C.J. Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy, 1880-1955* (Delhi, 1983); D.A. Washbrook, 'Economic Development and Social Stratification in Rural Madras: the "Dry Region", 1878-1929' in *The Imperial Impact*, eds. C. Dewey & A.G. Hopkins, (London, 1978), 68-82; and David Mandelbaum, 'The Nilgiris as a Region', *Economic & Political Weekly*, 17, 36 (4 September 1982), 1459-1467. Amongst geographers and economists the concept is more familiar. See, for example, the discussion in D. & A. Thorner, *Land and Labour in India* (London, 1962), 39-47. The definition of agro-economic zones according to the different forms of surplus appropriation found within each is a useful way into this approach and one that is logically preferable to the exchange or consumption approach from the view of (particularly Marxian) political economy. See G. Dupre and P.-P. Rey, 'Reflections on the Pertinence of a Theory of the History of Exchange' in *Relations of Production: Marxist Approaches to Economic Anthropology*, ed. D. Seddon (London, 1978), and the discussion of the work of Karl Polanyi and his school in B. Hindess and P. Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London, 1975), 25-6 and 261ff.
4. See for example, *Gazetteer of the Central Provinces*, (Nagpur, 1870), 260.
5. Central Provinces Settlement Department Compilations, J.B. Fuller to Commissioner of Chhattisgarh, June 1887.

6. *Raipur Settlement Report, 1885-89* (hereafter SR), H.H. Priest to Government India, 25 Oct. 1894, 38-99.
7. Very little of this grain was re-exported, only 163,000 maunds of the rice imported to Nagpur in 1923-4, for example, being re-exported toward Bombay. Likewise, only 150,000 maunds of rice was sent from Chhattisgarh direct to the United Provinces and to Bombay Port. See *Central Provinces, Berar* and *Central Provinces & Berar, Reports on Trade and Resources* and *Reports on Railborne Traffic*.
8. *Report of the Central Provinces Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, 1929-30 (hereafter CPPBECR)*, 4 vols. (Nagpur, 1930), IV, 946 and I, 352; *Report on the Marketing of Rice in India and Burma* (Delhi, 1941), 226, 248 et seq, 259, 400, 402 and appendix LXI. See also *Raipur SR, 1911*, 4 and *Raipur SR, 1885-89*, 38-39.
9. Indian Central Cotton Committee, *General Report on Eight Investigations into the Finance and Marketing of Cultivators' Cotton*, 8 vols. (Bombay, 1928), I, 21, 24, appendix X; II, 269-286.
10. N.M. Joglekar, *Report on Consolidation of Holdings in Modern Madhya Pradesh*, Planning Commission (Delhi, 1956-57), 15, 16, 32. A description of the various types of sharecropping and subleasing to be found in Chhattisgarh in the late 1920s is given in *CPPBECR*, IV, 866.
11. *CPPBECR*, I, 40.
12. *Raipur SR, 1885-89*, 28-29; *Durg District Gazetteer*, 99; *Bilaspur SR, 1904-12*, 76.
13. C.N. Bates, 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India: The Pivotal Role of Migrant Labour', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (1985), 575-594. The strategic role played by cheap, migrant labour in the development of the Narmada valley wheat zone is described in C.N. Bates, 'Class and Economic Change in Central India: the Narmada Valley, 1820-1930', in *Arrested Development in India: the Historical Dimension*, ed. Clive Dewey (Riverdale, 1987).
14. An independent but highly dispersed tribe known as the Agaria were responsible for smelting and forging all of the ironware needed by the Gonds and other tribespeople: see V. Elwin, *The Agaria* (Oxford, 1942).
15. See Indrajit Sinha, *The Gondwana and the Gonds* (Lucknow, 1944); D.S. Nag, *Tribal Economy (an Economic Study of the Baiga)* (Delhi, 1958); W.V. Grigson, *The Maria Gonds of Bastar* (Oxford, 1938); W.V. Grigson *The Aboriginal Problem in the Central Provinces and Berar* (Nagpur, 1944); R.V. Russell and R. B. Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, 4 vols. (London, 1916); B. K. Dube and F. Bahadur, 'A Study of the Tribal People and Tribal Areas of Madhya Pradesh', *Bulletin of the Tribal Research and Development Institute*, VI (Bhopal, 1966).
16. F. Perlin, 'Of White Whales and Countrymen in the Eighteenth Century Maratha Deccan', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 5 (1978).
17. See, for example, Grigson, *Aboriginal Problem*, 391, and K. N. Thusu, *Gond Kingdom of Chanda, with particular reference to its political structure*, Anthropological Survey of India (Calcutta, 1980). Thusu gives an excellent account of just how one such tribal state was constituted, though telling us little of its uses or purpose. A similar accusation may be levelled at R.G. Fox's interpretation of Chhattisgarhi history in *Kin, Clan, Raja and*

Rule: state-Hinterland Relations in Pre-industrial India (California, 1971), 129–163.

18. M.D. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972); H. Bernstein, '*African* Peasantries: a Theoretical Framework', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 6 (1978), 422. An excellent account of the judicial functions of the Gond zamindar in Chanda is given by C. Von Furer-Haimendorf in *The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh: Tradition and Change in an Indian Tribe* (London, 1979). There is considerable historical evidence to support a general theory of tribal economy in central India. More modern anthropological evidence is to be found in the village surveys conducted by the Agro-Economic Research Centre in Jabalpur, the Tribal Research and Development Institute in Bhopal, and the Anthropological Survey of India. See, for example, S.P. Pant, *Problems and Prospects of Small Farmers in the Tribal Areas of Chhindwara District* (Jabalpur, 1975). I do not wish to deny, however, that today in many areas the word 'tribal' is becomming increasingly devoid of meaning; see S.C. Corbridge, 'Agrarian policy and agrarian change in tribal India' in *Understanding Green Revolution*, ed. S. Wanmali and T. Bayliss-Smith (Cambridge, 1984). This remains a subject on which I intend to do more first hand reserarch.
19. G.F. Pearson, *Report on the Mandla District South of the Nerbudda* (Allahabad, 1860), 29, 31.
20. Elwin, *The Agaria*, 227.
21. J.T. Blunt, 'Narrative of a Route from Chinargur to Yentragoodum . . . 1795', in *Early European Trawellers in the Nagpur Territories* (Nagpur, 1930), 128–130. This calculation is based on the assumption that each bullock carried about 250 lbs. but that only a third were loaded at any one time.
22. R. Temple, *Report on the River Mahanuddy and its Tributaries* . . . (Nagpur, 1863), 49.
23. Grigson, *The Maria Gonds* (Oxford, 1939), 293; M.M. Joshi, *Bastar: India's Sleeping Giant* (Delhi, 1967), 70; S. Fuchs, *The Gond and Bhumia of Eastern Mandla* (Bombay, 1960), 177.
24. See C.N. Bates, 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India, 1820–1930' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1984), chapters 4 and 5.
25. P. Vans Agnew, *A Report on the Subah or Province of Chhattisgarh, 1820* (Nagpur, 1920).
26. Fuchs, *The Gond and Bhumia of Eastern Mandla*, 133–4 et seq; and *Census of India, 1911*, vol X, part I, 239–40.
27. See the descriptions in Richard Temple's *Reports on the Zamindaris and other Petty Chieftaincies in the Central Provinces in 1863* (Nagpur, 1908, reprint) 41 et seq. Also R.H. Craddock, *Note on the Status of the Zamindars of the Central Provinces, 30 June 1887* (Nagpur, 1905, reprint), and *Raipur District Gazetteer*, 55.
28. C.U. Wills, 'The Territorial System of the Rajput Kingdoms of Mediaeval Chhattisgarh', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, new series, XV (1919), 233.
29. For an account of the primitive conditions that persist even today in parts of Chhattisgarh see A.K. Danda, 'Tribal Economy of Chhattisgarh,' in *Chhattisgarh: an Area Study*, ed. A.K. Danda, Anthropological Survey of India (Calcutta, 1977).
30. Joglekar, *Consolidation of Holdings*.

31. Central Provinces Revenue Department Compliations, Col. C.B. Lucie Smith to Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces, 30 september 1880.
32. Proceedings of the Government of the Central Provinces in the Revenue, Agriculture & Commerce Department, May 22, 1872, nos. 7–9, minute by Col. Keatinge on the Mandla settlement.
33. N. Charlesworth, 'The Origins of Fragmentations of Landholdings in British India: a comparative examination', in *Rural India: Land, Power and Society under British Rule*, ed. P. Robb (London, 1983), 181–215.
34. Jogelkar, *Consolidation of Holdings*.
35. L.A. Babb, 'The Satnamis—Political Involvement of a Religious Movement', in *The Untouchable in Contemporary India*, J. Mahar (Arizona, 1972); T.H. Weaver in 'The Farmers of Raipur', in J.W. Mellor et al., *Developing Rural India: Plans and Practice* (Cornell, 1968), was also of the opinion that the fragmentation in Chhattisgarh was not of any obvious material benefit.
36. In one village Chamars were found to be taking possession and dividing up amongst themselves the holdings of absconded tenants without paying rent, considering the *malguzar* to be amply compensated by being allowed to add a few of the fields to his home farm. Absolute occupancy tenants were also found who quote willingly agreed to redistribution of village lands even though this meant that they ended up paying much higher rents. Settlement officers usually fixed absolute occupancy rents at a concessional rate and the willingness of tenants to forego this advantage suggests the operation of motives other than pure profit. See Central Provinces Survey & Settlement Records, Bundle 137/6/1903/2/1–4, E.R. Blenkinsop to Commissioner, Settlements & Agriculture, 2 Dec. 1902; and Central Provinces, Settlement Department Compliations, J.B. Fuller to Commissioner of Chhattisgarh, 12 November 1888, on the re-assessment of Sanara group, Simga tahsil, Raipur district.
37. B. Stein, 'The Segmentary State in South Indian History', in *Realm and Region in Traditional India*, ed. R.G. Fox (Delhi, 1977), 3–51; H. Kulke, 'Kings Without a Kingdom: The Rajas of Khurda and the Jagannatha Cult', *South Asia*, 4 (1974), 60–77. Another interesting parallel is to be seen in D. Seddon's description of a pre-colonial tribal structure in *Moroccan Peasants: a Century of Change in the Eastern Rif, 1870–1970*, (London, 1981).